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UNCLAS CAIRO 000104

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/ELA AND CA/OCS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PARM](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KPAL](#) [CASC](#) [IS](#) [EG](#) [XF](#)
SUBJECT: GAZA EVACUEES DESCRIBE "ORDEAL," ASSERT WAR
STRENGTHENED HAMAS

¶11. (SBU) Summary: Three Palestinian-American families evacuated from Gaza into Egypt on January 19 described for us their "horrifying ordeal" trying to survive Israeli attacks. They recounted the emotional trauma both they and their children experienced in the face of "primitive" living conditions and constant Israeli attacks. One Amcit noted that his family fled from "unlivable" conditions in Gaza City to the relative safety of Rafah where there was some food and electricity. This Amcit told us he believed that Gazans were on the verge of revolting against Hamas before the war because of the dire economic conditions, but that the Israeli attacks had strengthened Hamas. End summary.

¶12. (SBU) On January 20, we spoke to three Palestinian-American families who exited Gaza through the Rafah crossing into Egypt January 19, with embassy assistance. The families went through consular processing at the embassy January 20 in order to travel to the U.S., and we expect that all family members will receive the requisite documents to leave for the U.S. in the coming weeks. Two of the Amcit husbands described how they had lived in the U.S. separated from their families, in one case for three years, while they waited in vain for Israel to allow their families to leave Gaza for Immigrant Visa interviews at Embassy Tel Aviv or CG Jerusalem. They plan now to return to their businesses in the U.S. with their families. The third family, a young married couple, plans to live in North Carolina with the wife's Amcit mother, and the husband, a physics student, hopes to continue his studies in the U.S.

Surviving the War

¶13. (SBU) The families described their experiences in Gaza during the Israeli attacks as a "horrifying ordeal," living on the run as they tried to avoid air strikes and sustain themselves. One of the Amcit husbands, a 33 year-old who owns a cell phone company in Miami, told us how he and his wife, who is three-months pregnant, fled their home in Gaza City for the relative safety of Rafah where his sister lives. He said that Gaza City had become "almost unlivable," with constant Israeli barrages and acute shortages of necessities. He noted that his mother, who remained in Gaza City during the war, went without food and electricity for two weeks. In Rafah, he said, there was some electricity, food and water, but also constant danger from Israeli aerial bombardment of the Philadelphia Corridor, and missile strikes on the homes of Hamas supporters. He told us that in Rafah food shops located away from the Philadelphia Corridor continued to operate throughout the war.

¶14. (SBU) Another Amcit, a 43 year-old husband and father of three small children who owns a food business in Houston, became emotional when recounting his family's experiences in

Khan Younis during the war. He told us that his children were horrified by the nightly Israeli bombings, and that his wife, who was in shock from the attacks and the death of her nephew in an Israeli strike, was unable to comfort them. He and wife told us that they lived in fear of an Israeli missile killing them at any time. Without gas or electricity and unable to venture outdoors due to the fighting, the family was forced to cook over open fires inside their apartment. He noted that since June 2008, the family did not have any cooking gas because of the economic blockade on Gaza, but they had been able to cook over "primitive" open fires outdoors "like our parents and grandparents did in the 1940's and 50's."

Life Under Hamas Rule

¶ 15. (SBU) The 33 year-old Amcit told us that Gazans' anger at Hamas was on the rise before Israel's attacks began. He commented that although the overall Gazan economy markedly deteriorated after June 2007 because of the embargo, the increase in smuggling allowed Gazans new access to certain luxury goods. He said that the acute economic difficulties resulting from the embargo had caused "most Gazans to oppose Hamas" although people were afraid to take any action because of the climate of fear that Hamas had created. He described Gaza as "at the breaking point" before the war, and predicted that Gazans "would have revolted against Hamas." However, he asserted, the war strengthened Hamas by making the population much more sympathetic to the Hamas leadership. He commented on the irony that Israel's attempt to damage Hamas had only made the organization more powerful. "Hamas is much stronger

now," he opined. He speculated that the majority of Gazans opposed the rocket fire by Hamas and other Palestinian groups into Israel for only bringing "despair and destruction to Gaza." He told us that even during the war, Gazans did not view the rockets as defending them, but as only prolonging their suffering.

¶ 16. (SBU) This Amcit told us that Hamas' hold on power in Gaza was tenuous enough that the organization was wary of creating additional problems for itself by strictly mandating Islamic practices. He said women were free to drive and work, and that Hamas did not "want to push it." He noted that Hamas has been able to provide basic public services during its rule, but that, in retrospect, the Palestinian Authority (PA) was more efficient, although Gazans hated the personal corruption of PA officials who "lived in villas and drove luxury cars." He commented that Hamas brought order to Gaza by dealing harshly with tribal feuds. He explained that Hamas' summary executions of those accused of tribal killings had succeeded in decreasing the number of tribal clashes. He expressed hope that the new U.S. administration would pressure both Israel and the Palestinians to engage in a "truthful peace process" that will bring results. What most Gazans want now, he commented, is for their children to be able to sleep at night without enduring F-16 raids.

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